

REVOLTING GENDER IN PRATIBHA RAY'S YAGNASENI AND MAHASWETA DEVI'S DRAUPADI

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to undertake a comparative analysis of the writings of an Indian writer-activist Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi' (1926-2016) and the eminent Oriya novelist Pratibha Ray's 'Yagnaseni' (1985) keeping in mind their different social backgrounds and different time periods. However, in both the writings the gender discrimination has been presented and simultaneously the woman power of both the heroines and their defiance have been critically analysed. Both the Draupadis are exemplary symbols of revolt.

KEYWORDS: Social Background, Gender Discrimination, Defiance & Revolt

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INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses briefly the two famous women characters as symbols of retaliation to preserve their self-dignity. They are: Draupadi in Pratibha Ray's English translation of *Yajnaseni* (translated into English by Pradip Bhattacharya) and Draupadi in Mahasweta Devi's story, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Realizing a gender-equal society is one of the key factors in the development of a globalised society. The present study attempts to bring to the fore the emerging gender issues by focusing on Pratibha Ray's famous Odia novel *Yajnaseni*. The story of *Draupadi* originally written in Odia is based on Draupadi, the enigmatic heroine of the epic Mahabharata. Pratibha Ray has won the Sarala Award in 1989 and Moorti Devi award in 1991 for this famous novel. Through her writings she has revolutionized womanhood and redefined the role of women in the society. Here she successfully depicts the trials and tribulations of Draupadi, as an ordinary woman with a new approach whose story is often lost in the grand saga of the Mahabharata. The narration of Draupadi's ordeal appears contemporary and relevant to the present day gender issues that threaten the very existence and identity of woman in the society. Ray's *Draupadi* declares that her story is *nothing other than the life story of any human being in this mortal world*. (Ray, 4). As a modern woman, Draupadi unfolds the inner life of a woman and questions the patriarchal social evils of contemporary society.

Daughter of King Drupad, Draupadi, has been subjected to serious insults during her life time. It is true in the case of Devi Sita in the age of Ramayan and it is again the same thing for Draupadi in the *Dwapara Yuga*. Sita was apparently put to repeated tests and had to bear unimaginable humiliation only for the establishment of dharma. She ultimately surrendered herself to the lap of mother earth to escape all these earthly agonies. Draupadi like Devi Sita has taken birth to establish dharma and destroy the evil powers. Her birth, like Devi Sita, is not any ordinary birth as she is born from the sacrificial fire of *Yajna*. She is completely unknown to all these grand

designs of her birth. It is her *Sakha* Lord Krishna who reminds her the grand plan of God for the protection of dharma on the earth. *You were born to destroy your father's enemies. Not only your father's enemies, but the world's evildoers too.* (Ray, 24)

The picture of the woman that emerges from Ray's presentation of Draupadi reassures us that the plight of woman has not significantly changed in spite of several high sounding slogans such as woman empowerment, equal rights to woman etc. in a globalised society. Yajnaseni has always been treated in an undignified manner. The most serious and turning point in Yajnaseni's life is the incident in the Kuru Sabha where a dice game is arranged where Yudhishtir loses everything – his property, brothers and even his wife Yajnaseni. Here it is clear that females are always considered as play things by their husbands in all ages. Yudhishtir never seeks her consent before losing her in the dice game. Duryadhana orders Yajnaseni to come to the assembly hall and Duhshashan goes to bring her using very abusive language which is painful for Yajnaseni. Thus she asks the following questions to the society:

Was I part of Yudhistir's movable or immovable property, male and female slaves, horses and elephants? Being a woman did I not have right even over myself, my own self? If they had rights over his body of mine, did it mean they could do as they wished with me? (Ray, 235)

She runs in all directions to escape from the lustful arms of Duhshasan but everyone's apartment is closed. Finally Duhshasan overpowers her and drags her to the assembly hall. Yajnaseni narrates this physical assault on her in the following words:

As the wild buffalo drags some broken creeper along, similarly Duhshasan dragged me to the assembly-hall. With great difficulty I tried to cover my breasts with my single garment. The end of it had slipped off my head. Face, neck, arms were all bare. The hair in disarray. Out of Kindness they had covered my bare back from the sight of spectators. Like a creeper trembling in a storm, I was shivering with fear and shame. (Ray, 235-236).

Yajnaseni, the queen of five pandavas, pleads for mercy: *Let me remain alone in private. I am single-garmented, menstruating...* (Ray, 237) Nobody in the assembly hall stops Duhshaan's barbaric act. Karna's remarks are very insulting. He calls Yajnaseni a character less woman and justifies Duhshasan's saction by questioning her chastity. He says: *Even the gods have prescribed one husband for a woman. But by accepting five husbands she has discarded her modesty, shame and womanhood. Moreover, she has profound intimacy with her husband's bosom Sakha, Govind! (Ray, 240).* Yajnaseni cries for help but the pandavas cannot do anything as they are slaves to Duryadhan. Duhshasan begins pulling Yajnaseni's garment. It is the most horrifying and shameful act in the whole human society when a helpless woman is being stripped and valiant males like Bhishma, Dronacharya, Bidur, Krupacharya and Dhritarastra are silent witnesses to this heinous drama. Yajnaseni warns with rage and shame that *such outrage of womanhood will never be wiped out in history (Ray, 242).* Helplessly at the end she prays lord Krishna for help and is saved from being completely disrobed by the weapon of Dharma: the Sudarsan Chakra. Yajnaseni is made a victim of both physical and mental torture in her life. She takes a vow that her remaining days would be spent to fight against injustice, adharma and sin. Declaring woman, both as a creator as well as a destroyer, she declares that she would tie up her hair only after washing her hair in Duhshasan's blood. Many critics have blamed Yajnaseni for all the death and destruction of the battle of Mahabharata, forgetting the political intentions behind the entire game.

After the outrage of her modesty by the Kauravs, she urges her *Sakha* Krishna for exemplary punishment for these people. She apprehends that if such steps are not taken: then the history of Bharat will be filled with shameful accounts of atrocities against woman if the Duhshasans and Duryadhans do not receive the fruits of their sins, then in the future fate of women is shrouded in the darkest gloom. In the future this problem would remain unresolved for women. (Ray, 251). Yajnaseni, like the chaste Sita, could have disappeared into the depths of the earth to hide her shame, but she does not do like that. Pratibha Ray's Yajnaseni advocates that the wicked persons must be punished. Though she is herself a symbol of tolerance, she urges every woman not to tolerate injustice with bowed head. Therefore, she says if the husband adopts the wrong path and wife remains quiet, then everyone will suffer. The portion of sin in the world will increase. Innocent people will suffer the consequences of that sin. (Ray, 251). The Yajnaseni's story is not restricted to a particular age, but it is found in every age. During her last moments she does not wish either *moksha* or going to *Swarga* but rebirth in the coming ages. We see similar outrage of modesty of Yajnasenis in the contemporary society. Women are victimized in the name of religion, politics and social rules. In spite of her royal status Yajnaseni is considered a social stigma for her polyandrous marriage. According to Rajeswari Sundar Raja, Ray's Yajnaseni is a feminist as *she questions what happens to her, tragic in that she is doomed to confusion, solitude and ineffectual protest. She is claimed across historical distance but then surrendered to history.* (155) The gender issues raised in this novel through the character of Yajnaseni are quite pertinent to the 21st century globalised society as these issues are related to the problems that women face in our society. In the name of culture and tradition, women in different parts of the world are subjugated to many inhuman acts. Yajnaseni has been deprived of many pleasures in her life in spite of her royal status and she is considered as a social stigma for her polyandrous marriage. The Yajnaseni's story is not restricted to a particular age, but it is found in every age. During her last moments she does not wish either *moksha* or going to *Swarga* but rebirth in the coming ages. Thus we see similar outrage of modesty of Yajnasenis in the contemporary society especially in Mahasweta Devi's *Drupadi* translated by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak. *Draupadi is about the Santhal tribe girl, who is vulnerable to injustice but resist the burnt of social oppression and violence with indomitable will and courage and even try to deconstruct the age old structures of racial and gender discrimination.* As a novelist, Devi is the most prominent writer-activist who voiced for the voiceless sector of the society. She focused mainly on the predicament of the dispossessed tribes as well as other underprivileged people of East India. An illiterate, uneducated tribal woman, Dopdi is a peasant tribal whose name is derived from the name of the famous character in the Mahabharata. Being a tribal means she is not considered as a part of mainstream Indian society and thus occupies the lowest rung in a class based society. She leads the politicized life amongst all because she is engaged in an armed struggle for the rights and freedom of the tribal people. In the first two parts of the story, she fights shoulder to shoulder with her husband and in the third part of the story she is provoked to fight male oppression singly. Mahasweta Devi represents Dopdi not as victims, but equal to men who fights for her rights.

The Indian forces succeed in capturing the long wanted Dopdi with the tactics of the Bengali army officer, Senanayak. She is cross interrogated for an hour, but she remains firm and does not utter a word. Then Senanayak commands the soldiers' "Make her. Do the needful." (195) finally apprehended by the army, Draupadi is tortured and raped throughout the endless night and mutilated by infinite lustful men. After the tragic incident, Draupadi does not howl or behave like a helpless victim. In the morning, she refuses to put on her clothes, tears her piece of her clothes with her teeth, and washes herself. She walks naked towards Senanayak in the bright sunlight, very uplifted and sure. She says:

Come on, counter me come on, counter me. Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (p. 196).

The story is intensely powerful and shocking. Senanayak feels absolutely powerless and totally shaken. Her nakedness becomes an affront to the masculinity of the attackers. "What is the use of clothes? You can strip me, but can you clothe me again? There isn't any man here that I should be ashamed of," she asserts. Dopdi challenges Senanayak to counter her, "Come on, Kounter me-come on kounter me-" (37). Rape in a patriarchal society, is synonymous with the power of manhood. On the other hand, it is believed that a woman's honour lies in her inviolate body. Here, Dopdi does not let her nakedness shame her, torture her, intimidate her, or let the rape diminish her. Male sexual violence is defeated simply by its demystification and Dopdi emerges as "terrifying super object – an unarmed target." In Dopdi's life, no God saves her.

CONCLUSIONS

She performs both roles, one as a marginalized and the other as a woman. As a woman she becomes the active agent in performing the protest even giving away her 'body'. Similarly, as a marginalized, she becomes an alternative voice to stand out." (36) With her unconquerable will power, she gives a challenge to Senanayak. In Mahasweta's story, Draupadi acquires a new self-definition and becomes the active maker of her own meaning. She refuses to remain the object of a male narrative, asserts herself as 'subject' and emphasizes on the truth of her own presence. She constructs a meaning which "Senanayak simply cannot understand" (P.196). Devi's "Draupadi" is not meek and passive. She prefers the way of resisting, instead of remaining silent. She shows no traces of shame on her face; instead, her oppressors are left ashamed. Thus, in both these translated works, the women characters beautifully retaliate for their self-dignity, trying best to establish their feminine identities.

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